# Toolkit Stage 3
# **Engaging your audience(s)**

This stage is about working with your potential audience(s) so that they are receptive to the research and more likely and able to use it.

## **Key steps**

- Identify the roles, needs and expectations of your key stakeholders
- Establish close networks and open dialogue with your target audience(s)
- Identify any possible barriers to, and facilitators of, the use of research knowledge and evidence
- Identify your potential 'champion(s)' and engage them

## **Theory**

In terms of translating research knowledge and evidence into practice and/or policy, a key route to impact identified was 'audience receptivity'. Research will only have an impact if those who receive it have either the capacity or the skills to interpret and apply the findings. Understanding the needs of the potential research audience and their general 'receptiveness' to research will help to ensure that the knowledge produced will be realistic and relevant and therefore more likely to be used.

Engaging the target audience(s) is an essential role for either the researcher or the research funder (or both). As research funder, you may have a potentially important role to play as 'intermediary' between the researcher and the potential users of the research. You may have essential links within the field that the researcher might not. You may have a role as an 'independent' knowledge or relationship 'broker' that the researcher does not. If you want your research to have national impact, you may be in a better position to bridge the local agenda with the national through interpreting local needs (and offering a 'reality check' to national policy-makers).

Shared objectives and understanding of the latest developments in the field have the potential to lead to increased resources being available to develop the scope of research

project, ie through collaboration and co-funding. A shared understanding is more likely when there are close networks and open dialogue with, and between, key stakeholders within the field. As research funder, you may be in a better position than the researcher to capitalise on your existing networks and gain access to vital data needed for the research project.

Research knowledge and evidence is also more likely to be translated and adopted into policy and/or practice when there are 'champions' within the sector that can make things happen through their own position, connections and (sometimes) passion and dedication to the cause.

## Things to consider

It is important to be absolutely clear by this stage exactly who is likely to be interested in or affected by the research findings so that you can start to **engage and develop the key messages** relevant to them. As research funder, you may already have started to build these links in the early planning but at this stage it is important to make sure you have all the right people engaged.

Review your initial **stakeholder analysis**. Is there anyone else for whom the research knowledge would be of direct benefit? What are their information needs? What are their links/networks? What are their attitudes to using research to inform their work? How do they currently use research? What capacity do they have to make changes based on research knowledge and evidence? (Record as much information as possible, for example see Figure 4.)

What are the **barriers to the use or application of research knowledge** for your target audience(s)? Use the early steering/advisory group meetings to gauge the level of knowledge or research 'receptivity' amongst target audiences and to develop your networks further.

**Build and develop networks** at the appropriate level. Who are the key players in your networks? How far do your networks reach? Could they go further? What added value do you get from these links?

**Create strong relationships** with both the researcher(s) and your stakeholders and act as an intermediary between the two (the research project manager has a key role to play in facilitating knowledge exchange between those who produce the research and those who will use it). Do you or can you use face-to-face and informal communication to build connections between the researcher(s), practitioners and policy-makers (and any other potential beneficiaries of the research)?

**Identify 'champions' and engage them.** What are their links/networks? The researcher and/or steering group may help you to identify your 'champions'. Invite your 'champions' to be a member of the steering/advisory group.

## Helpful hints and possible pitfalls

The existence of champions may depend on the nature and size of the sector and such persons may not always be immediately identifiable or easily accessed. In some sectors there may be more obvious or known 'champions'. The key is to find a stakeholder(s) (including researchers) who share your understanding, vision and objectives for social change. Engage them early on so that they understand what you are trying to achieve and how they may be able to help that happen.

## Exercise/Framework

Revisit your stakeholder analysis and record all your potential audiences (including voluntary organisations, community projects, policy-makers, statutory or public bodies, other funders, academic institutions etc). Think about the possible ways of, or opportunities for, exchanging knowledge and information with each stakeholder. This will inform your knowledge translation strategy (see Stage 4). Include as much detail as possible about all your internal and external stakeholders; their role; their needs; their expectations; and the opportunities you have to communicate and exchange knowledge.

### Figure 4

**Key stakeholder analysis** – Record this within your knowledge translation strategy (see Stage 4).

| Named stakeholders (internal and external) | What is their role? | What are their needs? | What are their expectations? | Knowledge exchange activity |
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## ✔ Stage 3 checklist

- ◯ Stakeholder analysis completed/ reviewed

- ◯ Roles, needs and expectations of key stakeholders identified

- ◯ Possible barriers and facilitators to the use of research knowledge and evidence identified

- ◯ Strong networks and dialogue with key stakeholders initiated and/or developed

- ◯ Champion(s) identified and engaged